

Published: April 23, 2012, *Kokomo Tribune* [Pages: A1, jump to A5]

Reprinted: April 29, 2012, *Kokomo Tribune* (picture, with shorter version of story) [Page: D1]

http://www.kokomotribune.com/news/local_news/article_3cedd0a3-8ac8-5f67-b553-730fb4905d24.html



REMEMBER: Tanner Barton, "a gentle giant who never knew a stranger," was eulogized by friends and family in front of his family home Sunday night.

KT photo | Rob Burgess

Teen death sparks outpouring of grief

Dozens gather at Barton's house.

By Rob Burgess

Tribune night editor

As 8 p.m. grew closer on Sunday, the throng of mourners posted along the 4600 block of Brookhaven Drive continued to grow. The roadway

filled with many red, tear-streaked faces, most of them belonging to young mourners.

They were across the street from the family home of Tanner Lane Barton, 19, a varsity football player and graduate of Northwestern High School who was found dead at around 9:24 a.m.

“We were at church when we got the call,” said Maya Brooks, 17, a friend of Barton’s. “I couldn’t believe it.”

Despite the dozens and dozens gathered, only the staccato sound of sniffing broke the silence. Cold fingers gripped white candles speared through paper plates and red plastic cups. Seemingly at random, the assembled would throw themselves into each others arms, letting go of deep sobs in the process.

“It didn’t seem real, like it wasn’t really happening,” said Kassie Clark, 17, another friend of Barton’s describing how she felt when she heard the news. “He would always make you smile. We all went to his football games. We made T-shirts.”

The Howard County Dispatch Center received a 911 call that morning regarding an unresponsive male at a home in the 7900 block of West OONS, according to a release issued by Capt. Greg Hargrove of the Howard County Sheriff’s Department.

Barton was believed to be a close family friend and had been staying at the home overnight. Sometime in the early morning hours, Barton fell asleep on the floor in the basement.

“He was discovered in the morning. Interviews and evidence at the scene indicate Barton had consumed alcohol while at the residence, but the exact amount is unknown,” said Hargrove.

Family members made it clear Sunday evening that they did not believe alcohol was related to cause of death, saying it was most likely an undiagnosed medical issue.

“There were no apparent injuries at this time and the exact cause of death is unknown,” said Hargrove.

The case remains active through the coroner’s office pending the autopsy and toxicology results.

Former teammates donned their Northwestern High School jerseys reading “TIGERS” across the front. After the crowd gathered on the lawn, his former teammates placed white crosses in front of their fallen friend’s home

In turn, Barton’s mother tearfully hugged each speaker after they finished sharing their memory.

Barton was a freshman at Marian University where he played football, majored in sports management and qualified for the fall 2011 Dean's List.

Jared Lantz and Jake Rouch, teammates on the Marian University football team, shared with the crowd some of their fond memories of living with Barton. Lantz said he and Rouch once conspired while Barton was in the shower.

"I said to Jake, let's take his clothes," said Lantz, "Tanner said, 'if you do that I'm coming out of here in the shower curtain.'"

Rouch said they followed through with their plan, but so did Barton.

"Sure enough, he came out with the shower curtain on," he said.

Rouch said Barton was bright spot in his life, bringing joy wherever he went.

"He really liked to sing," he said, laughing. "It made me smile every time. He drove us nuts."

Brooks, 17, said she met Barton through Rouch, her boyfriend.

"Tanner was super nice and funny," she said. "Their favorite thing to do was to throw tomahawks together."

In the wake of the news, a Facebook group called “In Memory of Tanner Barton” was formed, quickly garnering 109 members as of 9:30 p.m. Sunday.

Anyone with information about this case is asked to contact Howard County Detective Ernie Shirey at 765-456-2031, ext. 274.

- Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor, may be reached by calling 765-854-8577 or via email at rob.burgess@kokomotribune.com.